

# THE SPANISH LAGOON WETLAND: A PLACE OF FIVE TALES

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**INTRODUCTION**

The south coast of Aruba is divided in the middle by a lagoon. The Arubans refer to these two halves as "pabao di brug" (west of the bridge), and "pariba di brug" (east of the bridge).

Driving across one of the two bridges that span the Spanish Lagoon a mangrove forest can be seen bordering on both sides of the lagoon.

If we venture inland beyond the lagoon we will come across what is perhaps the most spectacular natural area of Aruba, as we enter into the realm of the only natural bay on the island.

## SPANISH LAGOON

The origin of the name is somewhat obscure.

In the seventeenth century Spanish privateers, and in the eighteenth century English buccaneers and French filibusters as well (all of these also mundanely referred to as pirates) raided the poorly defended island.

When the Eighty Years War (1568-1648) raged between the Dutch Republic and Spain, and after the Dutch took possession of Aruba, the Spaniards regularly assaulted the island, and after 1651, as a result of the English Wars with Holland, Aruba also suffered attacks from English pirates.

The Lagoon, with its mangroves providing an excellent shelter for ships during storms, was a favorite hide-out for pirates, and with the main settlement of the Dutch, located at Commandeurs' Bay, only a mile away, robbing horses, victuals, and treasure was an easy undertaking.

## FRENCH PASS

Taking the main road from Santa Cruz to San Nicolas, one takes a left turn to drive through the French Pass, which leads to the Spanish Lagoon Wetland and Balashi Gold Smeltery Ruins.

The French Pass and the nearby Rooi Frances (dry river bed that transports water to the sea during heavy rains) both derive their name from a supposed attack made by French pirates at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The oral history of Aruba tells us about a spot where French privateers and Aruban Indians fought each other.

Bones of Indians killed in this battle were said to have been found in a cave nearby at the beginning of the nineteenth century,

and inspected by Reverend Bosch after 1824, and Van Koolwijk, an amateur archaeologist somewhere around 1880.

Folklore has it that at night the spirits of the Indians and French roam the area, and many Arubans will not venture through the pass after dawn.

## RUINS AT BALASHI

After passing the French Pass, you will find the ruins of the Balashi Gold Works at your right on the hillside.

As early as 1723, gold was prospected in Aruba.

Some gold was found but the mining of the precious ore was abandoned, because the yields proved to be too low to make gold mining a profitable enterprise.

In 1824, the Governor of the Colony of Curacao (to which Aruba belonged) received two letters from Commandeur Thielen of Aruba that gold had been found in Aruba.

The Spanish and Indian legends turned out to be true.

The first gold was found at Rooi Fluit, and the gold rush started. Initially only alluvial gold was found. Later in the century gold-ore was found at several locations.

Gold was mined at various sites and in 1899 Aruba Gold Concessions Ltd. from London obtained a concession for forty years.

The company built the Balashi gold smeltery, and constructed gold mines at Miralamar and several other sites.

In 1908 the Aruba Gold Concession Ltd., after incurring heavy losses stopped the mining of the precious metal and the gold works at Balashi were taken over by the Aruba GoudMaatschappij.

The Balashi smeltery which possessed six big furnaces, a high flattening-mill, refining tubs, conduits, its own electrical plant, and small rails on high wooden bridges, which led to the mangrove covered shore of the lagoon, stopped operating in 1916.

The ruins of Balashi, Bushiribana and Miralamar are the remaining symbols of the first era of industrial activity in Aruba.

## WETLAND AND MANGROVES

The Spanish Lagoon Wetland of Aruba, protected since 1978 under the international Wetland Convention, consists of a lagoon, mangrove forest, and muddy plain which turns into a marsh during the rainy season.

It is an area with an abundance of water, and therefore a safe haven for birds who breed and forage in the mangroves, on the

muddy plains, the marshes and the lagoon.

The lagoon and mangroves form a nursery, a sanctuary and feeding ground for many species, from resident and migratory birds, a horde of land and amphibian animals, to crustaceans, mollusks, and fish, and are important because rare species of invertebrates are found here.

Large tarpons can be found to jump out of the water in the lagoon occasionally, startling many a human visitor.

The Spanish Lagoon is a must for bird watchers, and is home to numerous species of birds, from egrets, cormorants, herons, swallows, stilts, plovers, sandpipers, to parakeets, pelicans and the large bare-eyed pigeons.

## ALOE FIELDS

A scenic road winds down from the Balashi ruins, past the marshes, along the lagoon, with on the left side the thicket of the mangroves and on the right side behind stone walls, on the sloping hills, the Balashi aloe fields.

At the end of the road lies a restored aloe plantation. For more than a century Aloe Vera was cultivated for the production of aloin, used in pharmaceutical products.

At one point about 25 percent of Aruba was planted with this succulent species. Aruba became the main exporter of aloe products in the world.

But cultivation decreased in the past decades, leaving many aloe fields abandoned and neglected.

In the semi-arid climate of Aruba, Aloe Vera is one of the few crops that withstands the long and severe periods of drought. Although not an endemic species, the plant had a great influence on the landscape, the culture, and the economy of Aruba.

It contributes to the characteristic landscape of the island, plays a role in the protection of soil against erosion, and its potential as an active ingredient in natural-health care and medicinal products is unprecedented.

A second ingredient from the aloe plant, the aloe gel, is now used as an ingredient for cosmetics.

The restored plantation reflects the efforts to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of Aruba by preserving and developing former aloe fields with their cultural practices, to show the Arubans and visitors of the island the important role aloe cultivation played in the Aruban history. □

